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SUBJECT: SERVIR PROJECT SUPPORTS DISASTER RELIEF AND ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING IN CENTRAL AMERICA

¶1. SUMMARY: The SERVIR project has closed a successful two-year global development alliance with USAID that created innovative geographic imaging tools to help manage disaster relief operations, monitor environmental trends and study the effects of climate change in Central America. In its next phase, SERVIR plans to join with the Central American Integration System (SICA) to improve data-sharing with partner agencies, develop better user interfaces and expand the application of SERVIR tools to agriculture, food security and other areas. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Drawing on information provided by USAID and NASA, this cable aims to inform other US agencies about the SERVIR project and the diverse applications of its geographic imaging tools. SERVIR welcomes support from U.S. missions and counterparts throughout Central America in finding new ways to use its decision-making tools.

BACKGROUND

¶3. SERVIR - Spanish for "To Serve" - is a Regional Visualization and Monitoring System that integrates earth observations (e.g., satellite imagery) and forecast models with in-country information sources for timely decision-making to benefit society. SERVIR was developed in 2004 by NASA, USAID, and other partners, at the request of Central American governments, as an innovative way to use space-based assets and geospatial technologies to analyze the effects of climate change. SERVIR currently provides critical information for Central America, the Dominican Republic and East Africa, addressing nine societal benefit areas of the Group on Earth Observations (GEO): climate, disasters, ecosystems, biodiversity, weather, water, health, agriculture, and energy. SERVIR maintains a website (www.servir.net) offering interactive maps, 3D visualizations and open-source sharing of scientific data.

¶4. SERVIR operates a Coordination Office/Prototyping Facility at the NASA/Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, and two Regional Operational Facilities - one for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and one for East Africa. The SERVIR regional operational facility for LAC is based at the Water Center for the Humid Tropics of Latin America and the Caribbean (CATHALAC) in Knowledge, Panama, and has been in operation since 2005. A second SERVIR regional operational facility was opened in 2008 at the Regional Center for Mapping of Resources for Development (RCMRD) in Nairobi, Kenya.

DIVERSE APPLICATIONS

¶5. To date, the SERVIR team at CATHALAC has responded to over 20 natural disasters and 10 environmental threats in Central America and the Dominican Republic. To help decision-makers respond to natural disasters, SERVIR tools have been used to show areas affected by flooding and used weather observations and geographic information to forecast vulnerability to flooding and mudslides. In one example highlighting the economic benefits offered by SERVIR tools, Salvadoran officials estimated that SERVIR saved $14 million by helping to manage fishing during a 2004 "red tide" event. With

support from CAFTA-DR environmental funds, SERVIR developed a detailed study of the potential impacts of climate change on biodiversity in Central America, published in 2008.

¶6. Currently, NASA and USAID are teaming with other US government agencies (e.g. NOAA, USGS, USEPA) to integrate additional capability into SERVIR, such as data through GeoNETCAST (NOAA), land-cover change monitoring tools (USGS), and air quality monitoring (USEPA). In addition, SERVIR is currently implementing pilot projects in CAFTA-DR countries involving government agencies, universities, and NGOs that use satellite data to address areas such as tourism, forest fires, and harmful algae blooms. The SERVIR project has also developed a geospatial portal to provide improved/free and open access to data and metadata throughout the region. The new SERVIR-Africa facility is initially focusing on establishing a geospatial portal to provide searchable and viewable earth observation data, as well as offer improved products to address flood forecasting and Rift Valley Fever using unique NASA space-based assets and models.

FUTURE EXPANSION

¶7. SERVIR is planning to expand its activities after completing its first two project phases under a Memorandum of Understanding among NASA, USAID, the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) and CATHALAC. Originally a non-governmental organization, CATHALAC was converted in 2008 to an intergovernmental organization and granted land from the Panamanian government to build a new SERVIR facility. To expand the application of SERVIR tools beyond its environmental focus, CATHALAC, USAID, and NASA plan to negotiate a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Central American Integration System (SICA).

¶8. Following its study of the effects of climate change on biodiversity in Central America, SERVIR plans to undertake a similar study of the effects of climate change on agriculture. Pilot projects in the Dominican Republic highlight potential applications for SERVIR tools in management of environmental complaints. USAID notes that SERVIR tools may also be useful in monitoring of air quality, and providing agricultural and meteorological information useful to insurance companies.

¶9. As it expands its applications, SERVIR is also working to improve data inputs from CAFTA-DR countries and develop user accessibility for its online tools. At the same time, SERVIR is working to ensure the long-term sustainability of its system by developing revenue sources to replace donor funding.

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